

# In Our View: Charter School Daze

## Foes of alternative schools should give facilities chance to prove their worth

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From a legal standpoint, the argument about the future of charter schools in Washington likely will depend upon funding for public education and how it can be spent. But the most important question should be how the issue impacts students and what can best enhance public education in the state.

In 2012, voters supported charter schools by a slim margin — with 50.7 percent of the vote (in Clark County, it was approved by 52.3 percent of the electorate). The proposal allowed for the establishment of eight charter schools a year up to a maximum of 40 throughout the state. Initiative 1240 also specified that priority would be given to students "who are most at-risk, including low-income students and those who are struggling in traditional public schools"; that teachers at charter schools would face the same certification requirements as those at traditional public schools; and that the charter schools must meet rigorous performance standards or run the risk of losing their charter.

All of that isn't good enough for the Washington Education Association and some parent and community groups, who have brought the issue before the state Supreme Court in an effort to scuttle charter schools. As the Associated Press reported from a recent hearing before the justices that focused on financing: "The central questions were: How many of those dollars are restricted to traditional public schools? How much leeway does the Legislature have in paying for the education of children whose parents decide to send them to charter schools?" The arguments stem from a ruling last year by King County Judge Jean Rietschel, who determined that charter schools are constitutional but that they cannot be defined as "common schools" because they are not under the control of voters in a school district.

While the court will weigh those items in determining the outcome of the case, citizens will remain hard-pressed to understand an argument against charter schools beyond the complicated legalese. As The Columbian has written editorially: "The diversity of experiences and opportunities among today's children is much greater than it used to be, as are the methods

under which certain students learn best. Charter schools often are better suited for tailoring a curriculum to specific needs."

The fact is that educational needs have been altered in recent decades, and the one-size-fits-all method of education often found in traditional schools is not the proper fit for many students. Charter schools — when accompanied by the safeguards found in Washington — can be helpful to many of them. Plus, while charter schools are independently managed and are operated by nonprofit organizations, they remain public schools that are supported by public dollars and are beholden to taxpayers. Hence the argument about finances and directing money away from traditional schools.

Washington in 2012 became the 42nd state to approve charter schools, giving the state an ideal opportunity to learn from the experiences of others. While charter schools are not a panacea for public education, they remain a viable endeavor on the small scale that was approved by voters.

We hope that will be the overriding factor when the court makes its decision. With the McCleary ruling hanging over the Legislature's head and with the fate of this year's Initiative 1351 still to be determined, the issue of school financing remains paramount in this state. But that should not override efforts to provide the best outcomes for students. Ideally, the issue of dollars won't take the place of sense.